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ABSTRACT

Visual literacy--seeing with insight--enables child viewers of pictures to examine elements such as color, line, shape, form, depth, and detail to see what relations exist both among these components and between what is in the picture and their previous visual experience. The viewer can extract meaning and respond to it, either by talking or writing about the pictures. Picture books in elementary classrooms can be used effectively (for example, "The Three Little Pigs") if planned around a sequence of stages that children can move through, namely (1) describing what they see, (2) comparing it with other visuals, and (3) valuing one of the pictures they are studying. In order to build a rationale for including visual literacy experiences in the curriculum, baseline data about what students can do in this area and developmental data showing the effects of planning and teaching a sequence of lessons are needed. Initial data gathering suggests that a curriculum which includes studying pictures analytically should easily lead to a deeper response to pictures. This in turn should make experiences with picture books far richer than is currently the case, when most instructional emphasis is on the story line. In the process, children will develop the skill of looking at visuals, which should be transferable to other contexts. (NKA)

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Visual and Verbal Literacy

by

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Who needs another kind of literacy? Experts concerned with developing children's reading literacy have been at work for a long time, and have advanced our knowledge of how to help children become readers. More recently, advocates of writing literacy have raised our consciousness about this area and its integral relation to reading literacy. But there is still important work to be done in these two better-established, more commonly accepted areas. Why should we direct our attention to yet another literacy, that of seeing with insight?

Actually interest in this topic is not new. During the flourishing sixties when innovation was easier to find in education, experts pointed out that we receive over 80% of our information visually (Debes, 1974). This fact, and the implications drawn from it, led educators--primarily at the high school level--to carve an elective place for visual education in the curriculum, most commonly through film courses. Such experiments were written up in professional journals, though for the most part they consisted of enthusiastic endorsements of instructional strategies, rather than even loosely controlled data gathering to document outcomes.

After that initial spurt of interest in visual literacy, little of which influenced the elementary curriculum, teachers turned their attention to coping with repeated calls for a return to basics. But the fact that we remain surrounded by visual information, that we learn much of what we must through our eyes, remains a reality despite cycles in education.

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Simply being surrounded by visuals doesn't mean that we have automatically become more sophisticated in interpreting and reacting to them. We live in a highly visual world, though art education experts continue to point out that few of us see with the discrimination and sensitivity we could if we possessed an educated eye. The television-saturated generation we teach doesn't show remarkable insight as consumers of visuals despite hours of viewing. So what do we mean by visual literacy, and how could it become part of an elementary curriculum?

To answer that question, we might draw an analogy with readin literacy. In reading literacy, the reader brings a background of previous experiences and knowledge to the task. Within this context, readers examine the various components of the author's written language, seeking relationships between them and between these components and their own background. This involves analyzing units like paragraphs, sentences, phrases, and words, and discerning the ways they go together. Readers extract the writer's meaning, compare it to their own meaning and respond. Sometimes the response is oral, at other times written.

Children can do the same sort of process with pictures. Bringing a visual background, unreflected upon though it may be, child viewers can examine the various components of the pictures in the context of this background. Looking at such art elements as color, line, shape, form, depth, and detail, viewers can see what relations exist between these, and between what is in the picture and what they have seen previously. The viewer can extract meaning, and respond to it, either talking about or writing about the pictures. In this process, the child is motivated to look more carefully, to

notice new relationships, and to consider more thoroughly reactions to what is seen.

All of this can be made much more specific at the elementary level as we consider materials and methods. For materials, picture books offer many possibilities. Though they are the common currency of most elementary classrooms, picture books are too often considered simply as containers for stories, rather than visual artifacts to be examined. Using picture books we can help children look more deeply at the illustrations they contain, and at the related book design elements which also affect the total visual impression. By consciously planning sequences of experiences in which children's visual attention is directed to art elements, we can heighten their ability to look, and their fluencey in responding.

To do this effectively, we also need to think about procedures. I want to suggest that it would facilitate more insightful looking if we moved children through a sequence of stages: describing what they see, comparing it with other visuals, and finally valuing one of the pictures they are studying.

Specifically, in using three versions of Peter and the Wolf, we might have children practice these three skills. First, they could describe what they see in the version with pictures by Erna Voigt (Godine Publishers, 1980). Then they could compare these with the visuals by Charles Mikolaycak (The Viking Press, 1982). Another day they could compare these with the visuals in the edition by Jorg Muller (Alfred A. Knopf, 1986). Third, they could decide which of these three they like best, and write or talk about reasons for their choice. As we encourage children to look carefully at what is on the page, thinking about it in the context of other pictures they have

seen, they can develop their ability to respond more fully and to express their response to a listener or a reader.

Until now most descriptions of what is possible in this area have been enthusiastic recommendations, rather than systematic attempts to gather information about outcomes. Now, I would like to suggest that we need two kinds of information in order to build a rationale for including visual literacy experiences in the curriculum.

First, we need baseline data about what students--without any planned instructional sequence--can do in this area. For example, we might ask such questions as the following. What kinds of art do children prefer? Can they articulate reasons for these preferences? How do these preferences relate to what is commonly contended in books about this topic? Barbara Kiefer's important dissertation begins the process of gathering such information, laying an important foundation for further work.

Second, we need developmental data showing the effects of planning and teaching a sequence of lessons in visual literacy. Related to this, we might ask such questions as the following. Can we in fact cause children to become more sophisticated consumers of visual art and more articulate responders to it, in oral and written language? What kinds of developmental patterns might emerge if we studied the visual literacy of the same group of children over a number of years? Can we make significant changes in children's abilities when they are in intermediate grades, or must such work--for maximum outcomes--begin in the early years?

Classroom Data Gathering

Because data about visual literacy is sparse, we gathered some information last school year. The data is written responses to versions of The Three Little Pigs by Eric Blegvad (Atheneum, 1980), Lorinda Bryan Cauley (G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1980), and Edda Reinl (Picture Book Studio USA, 1983). Over a four day period these were presented to fifth grade children* who had not previously been involved in any visual literacy activities. The 28 children listened to a version read aloud on each of three succeeding days; each day's reading was followed by discussion in which boys and girls were encouraged to describe what they had observed about either the pictures or the story. On the second and third day, children compared how the pictures were like and different. On the fourth day, after a brief re-introduction to each book, students wrote a statement about which version they liked best and why. While they were writing, the books were available in case any writer wanted to check visual or textual details. Students were encouraged to spell the words they wanted to use any way they could so vocabulary choice would not be constrained by spelling ability. As the student writers finished, the classroom teacher supervised them in another activity, to allow time for those not yet finished to complete their work. The first student writer finished in about 10 minutes while the last one completed writing about 25 minutes later.

The stories were analyzed to determine what kinds of comments children chose to make. The responses from the 28 children ranged from 43 to 193 words in length, indicating that 4 preferred the Blegvad edition, 14 the Cauley, and

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*Thanks to Barbara Ebersberger, Milwaukee Public Schools, for allowing us to work in her classroom.

9 the Reinl. One child indicated that because of the words he preferred one version while he liked the pictures better in a different version. In most cases the data is reported in terms of the number of comments made, not the number of children commenting, since in some cases a single child made several comments about one aspect of the book.

Art Elements. Children wrote about various art elements. The most often commented-upon element was color, with 25 statements about this element. Most often these were very general. For example, Eric said the Cauley book was "colorful." He didn't elaborate further on this, and the comment as it is really doesn't tell us what aspect of the color attracted his attention. This statement illustrates a caveat to be kept in mind throughout this report. The analysis is based on children's written responses. Had we interviewed each child about his/her writing, we would probably have a fuller idea of the intent of the remarks.

Some children, like Lisa, talked of feelings related to color, when she said the color in Blegvad was "calm." This is an example of the emotional response to color which William Moebius talks about in his recent fine article.

At other times students offered more extended comments. Jason wrote:

> I liked Cauley most because of the colors. The many bright colors blended very well with the shaded darker colors. The wolf was colored with shades of white, light brown and dark brown, and strips of greyish black in his long slender, furry, and fluffy tail.

Related to color, there were twelve positive comments about brightness, though none were further elaborated.

Students offered 12 comments on the amount of detail shown in the pictures. Most children reacted favorably to greater amounts of detail, but in choosing Reinl as his favorite, Richard wrote: "The pictures are also easier to understand than the more detailed versions."

Four writers talked about size of pictures, in each case commending the artists for providing large pictures. One child commented about the shapes in the pictures, and another about the "broader line" used by Reinl.

Some students also commented about the medium used; there were six comments made about the batik medium, which had been discussed before the Reinl book was shown. In contrast, only one child commented on Blegvad's use of watercolor, though this medium had also been discussed before sharing the book.

Concerning the larger issue of how the pictures were done, there were eight comments about the realistic pictures in both Blegvad and Cauley. There were only five comments about the unrealistic pictures in Reinl, with Becky calling them "fictitious." One child commented that the Blegvad pictures look old-fashioned.

Book Design. In addition to comments about art elements in the illustration, some writers noted book design elements in general.

There were three comments about full-page pictures. For example, Brooke wrote: "I also liked the way there was one whole page for an illustration. It helped you know what was going on in the story. This is what I prefer." Kris wrote about the Cauley pictures:

> I enjoyed the widespread pictures. Every picture covers the whole page. I was immediately attracted to them from when the book was opened until it was closed. I was especially interested in the fair scene. The illustrator went from the bottom up until she filled the page.

Interestingly, there were two comments about Reinl's book having more pictures than words, which is not technically true. The size of the pictures, covering the entire page, may have prompted this comment. There were also two comments about print being superimposed on the visuals. About this latter point, Quinn wrote:

> I liked the way they colored the whole page instead of just half the page, and put the writing right in with the pictures.

About the same point, Kris wrote: "I liked the way the author wrote the story right on the pictures." Less frequent comments included one about the borders in Cauley's pictures, and another on the smoothness of the paper in Reinl.

Content. In addition to comments about visual elements, students also wrote about the content, or what the artists included in the pictures.

For example, children made seven comments about the fact that some of the animals were clothed. The majority of these were positive. For example, Gabriel wrote: "The clothing the illustrator gave to each of the little pigs helped to give you the personality of each of them."

Five comments were made about the reason the little pigs left home. For example, about Reinl's version, Richard said: "Also, the mother sow was not poor. She just did not have enough room, which makes it less saddening (sic)."

Children made three comments about the wolf blowing up in Reinl. There were two comments about the fact that this artist's pigs are not eaten. The same number of comments were given about the amount of background included in the pictures. About Cauley's work, Alesander said: "They had a lot of background but it was sometimes hard to understand what was going on if you hadn't read the story yet."

Other comments were less frequent. One child noted the pigs walked on two legs. Curtis was very precise in noting: "The pigs walked on their two hooves and the wolf walked on his two paws." One child noted that in Cauley the pig is reading a book.

Text. In the instructions given before writing, students were encouraged to also comment on the story itself if they wished. The tally of responses indicate that children far less often chose to write about the text than about either the pictures or the content. This is despite the fact that in discussions following initial sharing of the books, talk focused about equally on the text and the pictures.

Six comments were made about the perception that it was not necessary to read the words because the pictures told the story. About Blegvad, Jason wrote: "The pictures told the whole story themselves because they were so clear."

Two comments noted that the vocabulary made the story seem "grown up." One child said that the words were different than in the version she knew. Another commented that there was not too much print in the book. One child, Lakevia, had some reservations about the words, when she wrote about Cauley:

> I really don't have too much to say about the words but they were really heavy or technical for smaller kids. You would have to make up your own simple words. Or just say nice things to them about the story.

Her comments may have been stimulated by Cauley's use of such words as furze instead of the more common word sticks, used in the other two versions.

Besides comments at the individual word level, some children wrote about larger rhetorical concerns. One said: "Reinl got right to the point and they didn't have any of the apple tree or turnip patch or the fair business."

Another child commented on the detailed sentences, while one noted differences in events and sequences from the version she knew, though she did not identify what those were.

Two children summarized their concerns about the way the story ended. Jason wrote:

> I didn't like the way the story was told because the first two pigs should have lived to learn a lesson that hastily done work can lead to trouble.

In contrast, Eric chose Cauley's book:

> I also preferred that the pigs were eaten, because the fat little pigs couldn't outrun a fox which is speedy and sly. I prefer the ending because the pig was doing something to save himself. And he got a good meal!

To close, complete stories in contrast to the excerpts included earlier, may give additional insights into student response. In choosing the Blegvad as favorite, David wrote:

> I preferred it mostly because of the pictures. They were much more realistic, not what's drawn, but how it's drawn. The pictures aren't exaggerated either, like the elephant ears in Reinl. It was done in water colors, and they looked better than the batik. There is probably a limit to realism and accuracy in such a time-consuming process. Cauley was more colorful but the pictures were not very realistic and were more like cartoons.
>
> The story was also better as the others were more like young children's versions. Having episodes was better than having a wolf just burst and it's a little odd to hear about pigs reading picture books. Also, in Cauley's second book, there were less words and more pictures, so it was somewhat less exacting and detailed.

Theresa chose the Cauley book, and wrote

> It had very colorful pictures. As soon as you looked at the pictures you can get an idea of what they are trying to tell you about the pictures without reading the words. The little children would like the pictures better because of the pictures' brightness.
>
> I liked the story because it was more realistic of the fiction they had. For example, the pigs were from the country and they wore old

country clothes. This story was different than the one I heard but I like this one better. The pigs were sad to leave their mother, but in Blegvad they went off like they were not sad. I liked when the wolf and the pigs were dressed up in clothes. This was a very good story.

Finally, Katie chose the Reinl:

I like this one because in that story, the pigs did not get eaten like they had in the other two books. Also, I thought that it was more realistic to have pigs be sent away because of not enough room, rather than because they were too poor, because the pigs in the first and second book didn't look too poor.

I also liked the pictures because I liked the batik. The reason I liked the batik was because I thought it was bright and colorful. I thought the colors looked very blended together and the smoothness of the paper also attracted my attention.

Summary

Such initial baseline data gathering as this can do little more than make the point that children are interested in, and able to look at and write about pictures. This group of fifth graders, taking part in such activities for the first time, commented often about a variety of different aspects of visual elements, content, and text. What this data suggests is that a planned, sequential curriculum of looking at pictures, of studying visuals in the context of children's own experience, of analyzing components, should easily lead to more in-depth response to pictures. This in turn should make experiences with picture books far more rich than is currently the the case, when most of the instructional emphasis is on the story line. In the process children will develop the skill of looking at visuals which should be transferable to other contexts.

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